

## **Rethinking Individualization: The Basic Script and the Three Variants of Institutionalized Individualism**

### **Abstract**

In this article, we propose a more culturalist and variegated conception of the individual than presented by individualization theorists. Inspired by the approach of the individual advocated by E. Durkheim, T. Parsons and J. Meyers, we first outline the general script of the individual-as-actor that informs modern individualism as well as the generic characteristics we routinely attribute to persons such as agency and free will. We subsequently reconstruct three predominant interpretations of this general script, i.e. utilitarian, moral and expressive individualism. For each variant, we briefly present the intellectual genesis and overall definition, the institutionalization in specific societal domains and the dominant articulations in social theory. With our threefold distinction, we primarily try to synthesise the extensive literature on individualism and to show the sociological strengths of approaching subjectivity in terms of institutionalized scripts.

### **Keywords**

Individualism, utilitarian individualism, moral individualism, expressive individualism, cultural script, institutionalization

## **Introduction**

According to a widespread diagnosis, the role of subjectivity has vastly increased in contemporary society. How must we understand and conceptualize this tendency? Individualization theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens contend that we have witnessed since the 1960s a marked rise in individual autonomy and personal reflexivity as a consequence of the de-institutionalization of former socio-cultural traditions (such as Christian religion) and identities (such as class- or gender stereotypes) (Dawson, 2012). Released from previously existing constraints, self-consciousness and personal choice have become built-in expectations within various societal domains such as education, labour or the sphere of primary relations. Overall, this individualization process is thought in a homogeneous way: it has the same form in the diverse institutional domains making up late modernity.

In this article we advocate a less rectilinear and less one-dimension approach and instead propose a culturalist and multifarious take on both modern individualism and the more recent process of individualization. This alternative perspective is primarily inspired by insights of Emile Durkheim (1973), Talcott Parsons' (2007) broader considerations on institutionalized individualism and John Meyer's and Ronald Jepperson's (2000) analysis of the actor-notion as a basic script within modern culture. By discerning three

institutionalized variants of the individual-as-actor script, i.e. utilitarian, moral and expressive individualism, we can more adequately grasp the somewhat contradictory nature of the dominant understandings of the individual. Hereafter we reconstruct these three subscripts from a threefold point of view. After defining its principal characteristics, we briefly point out for each mode in which societal sphere(s) it is most pronouncedly institutionalized. For besides having a considerable general societal and personal impact, each form of institutionalized individualism is more strongly and legitimately embedded within one or more societal fields. In a word, the overall societal institutionalization of three modes of individualism goes hand in hand with their selective embedding within specific social spheres. We complete the presentation of each script by briefly mentioning its main theoretical elaborations or ‘crystallizations’ in social theory. Besides being influential cultural scripts, utilitarian, moral and – to a lesser extent – expressive individualism have indeed also been re-articulated into social scientific frameworks in their own way.<sup>i</sup>

### **Two Approaches of the Individual-as-Actor**

Together with globalization theory, individualization theory has meanwhile become part and parcel of common social-scientific knowledge. However, the leading proponents of the individualization paradigm also partly differ in their views of the conceptualized

phenomenon. Whereas Bauman (2001a, 2001b) links individualization to a primarily consumption-driven society in which once solid values have become 'liquid', resulting in an existential loss of normative orientations, Giddens (1991) offers a more optimistic analysis. He emphasizes the reflexive bond between late modern institutions and the self. Abstract systems such as the global financial system or so called expert systems position the self into an open-ended project that has to deal with uncertainty and risk but that is also capable of trust and commitment. Furthermore, the increased sense of reflexive awareness results in a new kind of 'life-politics' within the public sphere, which contrasts with Bauman's more bleak perspective of public engagement. Beck (1992), who coined the notion of individualization and relates it to the second phase of modernity, also underlines the immanent relation between the growth in individual autonomy or responsibility and an elevated sense of personal risk and uncertainty. How one deals with the latter is a matter of finding biographical solutions to systemic contradictions (compare Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Notwithstanding these notable differences, Bauman, Giddens and Beck relate the process of individualization to a decline of previously institutionalized life forms related to religion, traditional gender and family roles, social class and/or territorially embedded communities. Moreover, they emphasize the institutionally embedded character of individualization within the spheres of for instance education, the labour market or law.

Overall, today's social structures take the individual as basic unit and emphasize responsabilization and activation. For example, being unhealthy or staying unemployed are increasingly regarded as personal shortcomings. And if individuals 'are not sure about their career prospects and agonize about their future, it is because they are not good enough in winning friends and influencing people and have failed to learn the arts of self-expression and impression others', Bauman (2001, 47) observes.

This approach of individualization contains some elements that are questionable. Firstly, it is in general rather unclear to what extent Bauman, Giddens and Beck assume that individuals effectively possess the basic capacities traditionally associated with the notions of autonomy and subjectivity, i.e. self-consciousness and free will. Due to the diminishing impact of socio-cultural facts, individual reflexivity and personal decision-making have gained in importance, yet to what extent does that latter process result from either the actualization of already existing but formerly 'repressed' personal capacities or the way late modern institutions address individuals?<sup>ii</sup> Secondly, individualization is presented as a homogeneous socio-historical trend that traverses different institutional spheres in a uniform manner through the enhancement of self-reflexivity, individual autonomy and biographical 'self-planning'. However, don't we need a more complex notion of individualization that takes into account both the diverse faces of the dominant understanding of individuality and the uneven ways they are embedded in the different

domains making up modern society? Can we for example put on a par the idea of individuality underlying the legal notion of universal human rights and the one informing 'the right to be yourself' in the sphere of personal relationships?

In addressing these two lines of critique, we advocate a twofold conceptual clarification. Firstly, the process of individualization does not mean that a growing number of persons effectively gain in self-consciousness or autonomy against previously solid but meanwhile attenuated social-cultural facts. Instead, it first and foremost implies a marked shift in the collectively shared, personally interiorized and socially sanctioned core notions that co-define a culture, i.e. from primarily group-oriented representations to a mainly self-oriented script. Secondly, within our culture the notion of individuality points to both a basic script and its variegated articulation in three different, mutually contrasting definitions of a person's core qualities. The subscripts of utilitarian, moral and expressive individualism are unevenly institutionalized within the different societal spheres and related to distinct intellectual traditions. This approach not only underlines the different nature of existing conceptions of individualism but also allows to situate the recent process of individualization against the background of a much broader history of subjectivity and its conceptualization.

In suggesting this variegated and overtly culturalist take on modern individualism as well as individualization, we are of course not exactly opening up a new vista.<sup>iii</sup> We

indeed partly rely on the respectable French tradition initiated by Emile Durkheim's (1963, 1973) well-known considerations on moral individualism. Inspired by Durkheim's work, Talcott Parsons (2007) later coined the notion of institutionalized individualism to underline the socially imperative and culturally regulated character of moral individualism and its seemingly more natural counterpart, i.e. utilitarian individualism. We adopt the concept of institutionalized individualism and selectively combine it with the idea of the actor-as-script as proposed by John Meyer and Ronald Jepperson (2000) in their inspiring analysis of 'the "actors" of modern society' (compare Krücken and Drori, 2015).<sup>iv</sup> This basic script is central to modern culture and discursively transforms unqualified individual or social entities into qualified actors or subjects possessing agency and the related qualities of (a conditioned) autonomy and self-reflexivity. Leaving out its collective articulations, we focus hereafter on the three dominant individual variants of this model, i.e. utilitarian, moral and expressive individualism. Given their institutionalized character, these 'grammars of the individual' (Martucelli, 2002) or 'subject cultures' (Reckwitz, 2006) nowadays inform common ways of thinking about or acting towards individuality and alternately specify, extend and supplement the predominant individual-as-actor script, yet without deconstructing its primary contours.

### **Utilitarian Individualism**

### ***Definition***

As an articulated theoretical position, utilitarian individualism dates to the work of English political philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Both regard the individual as the sole proprietor of his own person and his capacities or skills, which he may therefore freely trade on the market. C.B. Macpherson's (1969) famously characterized this view as 'possessive individualism', yet underlying Hobbes' and Locke's model of human nature is the idea that selfishness is a prime motive of action. Human actions are therefore essentially understood as utilities or means towards the satisficing of egoistic ends.

The influence of the utilitarian framework exceeds the strictly intellectual realms of liberal philosophy or moral theorizing. Writing during the 1830s on American individualism, Alex de Tocqueville (2000) envisaged the utilitarian variant and stressed its immanent relations with democracy and equality. Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (2001) argued at length that utilitarian individualism had become an essential ingredient of modern *Gesellschaft* as such. Considered as an institutionalized subscript, this mode of individualism gives a specific twist to the more general modern actor-script (compare Parsons 2007; Bellah et al., 1985). It positions the individual above all as a *homo economicus* who consciously pursues his personal concerns in a rational-calculative mode, so as efficient or self-maximizing as possible.



Involved is indeed a self-directed script in which actions primarily appear as premeditated means to realize or advance in the mode of free will individual interests, preferences or desires.

As an established view of human nature, utilitarian individualism is most closely related to what is commonly regarded as egoism. With the utilitarian script therefore corresponds the well-known picture of society as ‘a lonely crowd’ (Riesman, 1950) – as consisting of a multitude (the older terminology) or a mass (the more recent one) of self-directed atoms who first and foremost entertain calculative exchange relations with each other. The other is not valued for himself but fundamentally appears as a possible means to achieve private ends: social action is first and foremost strategic action, the self-centred calculative use of the other’s actions or capacities as self-serving resources.

### ***Primary Societal Institutionalizations***

Notwithstanding its apparent anti-social leanings, utilitarian individualism already functions for quite some time as a dominant interpretative scheme underlying individuals’ actions, self-understanding and idea of social relationships. Moreover, this particular scripting of the individual-as-actor is vastly institutionalized within the economic field, which greatly contributes to its seemingly evident character. Given the direct conceptual affinity between the notions of self-interest, maximizing exchange and free market

relations, this specific societal embedding is of course everything but strange.<sup>v</sup> Through the figure of the individual-as-entrepreneur who combines maximum profit seeking with the taking of personal risks, utilitarian individualism has even created its own kind of social hero. However, the individual-as-consumer remains as important a figure within this script since this socially sanctioned role couples the socially legitimate articulation of self-interests to the buying of commodities.

To see the economy as a market with its own ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 2010) apart from state regulation is a fairly recent phenomenon. Adam Smith’s famous notion of the invisible hand in fact economically translated the utilitarian moral maxim that the general interest will automatically emerge if everyone pursues his own interest. Accordingly, liberal governance theory from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century onwards prescribes that the market economy is self-regulatory and not in need of much external steering. Rather, economic governance must be a sober exertion of power that intervenes as little as possible in existing markets. However, as for instance Michel Foucault (2010) or David Harvey (2007) have emphasized, the kind of neoliberal governmentality that has come to dominate since the 1980s clearly takes another line of action. It actively creates and oversees markets, for instance through the termination of previous state monopolies or by means of a ‘regulated deregulation’ that counters the quasi-spontaneous formation of fixed market hierarchies or cartels on the one hand and enhances free competition among

supervised agents on the other. Moreover, neoliberal governmentality further institutionalizes the script of utilitarian individualism within private and public organizations through a managerial regime that posits workers as entrepreneurial, self-interested individuals. It indeed systematically incites them to rationally compete with others on internal and external markets for scarce means or incentives, ranging from project money to staff support to personal bonuses (compare Laermans, 2009).

According to Jürgen Habermas (1983), modern-western societies have actually institutionalized strategic action within the spheres of both the economy and politics. Whereas money functions as the prime medium for the instrumental coordination of self-interested actions in the first domain, power takes up this role in the second field. Yet within the world of modern politics, utilitarianism also acquires a distinctive social dimension. Ranging from visible interest groups to diverse kinds of social organizations to political parties, various social actors try to advance within the political arena socio-economic interests or the specific concerns of the constituency they are organizationally catering for (compare March and Olson, 1989; Bleiklie, 2004). Different from economics, democratic or pluralist politics therefore does not privilege utilitarian individualism in a direct way but rather promotes the social aggregation of shared self-interests in view of their public articulation, their formal and informal pursuit and – ultimately – their mutual trade-off through negotiations on the distribution of scarce public means.

### *Theoretical ‘Crystallizations’*

The cultural script of institutionalized utilitarianism has directly influenced the different strands of rational choice theory (RCT). Academic sociology has been from its early beginnings quite suspicious of purely utilitarian explanatory models, partly to delineate its own disciplinary identity from economic science. The founding fathers of sociology indeed stress the importance of social rules or individual motives that go beyond a mere utility calculus (Zafirovski, 1999). Whereas Durkheim (1973) emphasized the societal necessity of norms regulating utilitarian actions of whatever sort for the sake of social order, Max Weber (1978) deliberately defined the category of goal-rational action as an open concept, thus dissociating it from particular individual motives such as the pursuit of economic or material interests. Depending on the societal context in which it is embedded, calculative instrumental action may therefore involve divergent goals.

The somewhat cliché-like difference between the utilitarian and presumably selfish *homo economicus* on the one hand and the norm-driven, successfully socialized *homo sociologicus* on the other hand remains overall relevant. Yet due to the highly influential works of Gary Becker (1976) and James S. Coleman (1990), RCT has meanwhile also become a widely applied paradigm within sociology (Hechter and Kanazawa, 1997) and political science (Erikson, 2011). Proponents of RCT champion it

as a unifying theory for the social sciences, a claim that has already sparked quite some controversy and will probably continue to do so (see e.g. Lichbach, 2003). According to RCT's principal axiom, individuals act rational in order to satisfy preferences or to maximize utility on the basis of motivating desires, beliefs – including beliefs on available options and their consequences – and disposable information on resources, likely outcomes, and so on. (Elster, 2007). Besides optimality requirements regarding these three components, no further presuppositions are made. RCT thus differs from the standard script of utilitarian individualism in a crucial respect: it does not assume that calculated purposeful action a priori furthers self-interests. Or as John Elster (2007: 193) notes: 'What is "best" is defined in terms of "betterness" of preference: the best is that than which none is better, as judged by the actor. There is no implication that the desires be *selfish*.' Moreover, sociological RCT not only takes account of individual motives but is a multilevel enterprise since it assumes the existence of an aggregated level of social determinants that influence personal behaviour and choice at a given moment.<sup>vi</sup>

Last but not least, a 'social' version of utilitarian individualism permeates conflict sociology (compare Elster, 1985). This sociologically influential line of thought contends that human beings do not act in a selfish way in the strict sense but advance those specific self-interests that are related to the social positions they take up in the fields of class, gender and/or ethnicity. Within these domains, they either defend their privileges or fight

for better living conditions. One may therefore speak of a socially conditioned utilitarian individualism that is first and foremost theoretically articulated and substantially differs from the prevalent cultural script. Its social character is twofold: individuals are regarded as having primarily position-derived self-interests on the one hand and they are expected to collectively defend these because of their shared nature and the efficient or goal-rational character of collective action on the other.

### **Moral individualism**

#### ***Definition***

Whereas the utilitarian script positions the individual as self-centred by nature, moral individualism is first and foremost other-directed since it emphasises the moral obligation to treat the other not as a means but as a goal in itself. Hence its intrinsic relationship with humanism, understood as the belief that every human being deserves respect on the mere basis of being human (Joas, 2013). Consequently, one must treat oneself as well as every other human being as the bearer of an at once unique and shared worth that derives from the sole fact of belonging to humanity. Nevertheless, the corresponding behaviour is primarily expected in the relations with others. Within modernity, Immanuel Kant (2015) has without doubt most forcefully voiced through his ‘critique of practical reason’ this

imperative that human beings must approach each other as ends that have a worth in themselves. Moreover, his theory shows that moral individualism is not just an ethical view of human beings, but logically implies a particular script of the individual-as-actor. Indeed, Kant highlights free will as morality's prime condition of possibility: thanks to this faculty, every individual has the effective capacity to realize the principal demand codified by moral individualism.

Overall, a notable relationship of both asymmetry and complementarity at once separates and unites utilitarian from moral individualism. The first aggrandizes the presupposed natural inclination to pursue self-interests as a prime motor of individual actions, not the least in the interactions with others; on the contrary, the second's focus on the other's intrinsic worth as an ethically commanding instance comes exactly with the requirement to treat her or him not in a purely instrumental or strategic way. In a word, moral individualism asks for the active personal tempering of what utilitarian individualism considers the main motivation of human action. In addition, utilitarian and moral individualism differ from a historical point of view. Whereas utilitarian individualism has an elective affinity with modern capitalism, the core of moral individualism's view of man can be traced back to the Christian notion of the human soul that is inherently valuable on the one hand, and to the equally Christian belief of God becoming human on the other (Joas, 2013). The idea that as 'a child of God' each human

being possesses an intrinsic value has been present from early Christianity onwards but was intensified during its further cultural evolution. Although the Reformation is often considered as a crucial first step in the modern process of secularization, it may also be regarded as gradually bringing an unmediated transcendence closer to humanity and even as initiating a sacralisation of ordinary life (Taylor, 1989). Faith was democratised, which resulted in an increasing importance of equality as well as of the value attributed to human worth.

The Enlightenment at once further solidified and secularized the view of humanity as consisting of individual beings who have all in principle an intrinsic worth that must be respected. Through their emphasis on the values of justice, liberty and equality, *philosophes* such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire not only ‘rationalized’ moral individualism but also gave it a staunch political twist that was highly influential. Thus, the French revolution and the American Independence movement directly challenged from the point of view of moral individualism the hierarchical notions of humanity as represented by the institutions of the clergy and the nobility. Later on, moral individualism gained further societal prominence through the declining socio-cultural role of the transcendental level and, inversely, the increasing sacralisation of the individual within modernity (Joas, 2013).



### ***Primary Societal Institutionalizations***

The ethical horizon of equal human worth became effectively institutionalized in several domains, yet besides the sphere of daily life – in which moral individualism often acts as a taken for granted ethics – law and politics are probably the most important ones. Within law, the notion of the autonomous, rational and equal individual is not only the prime ground for attributing juridical responsibility. Since the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens (1789), moral individualism acquired a direct juridical translation as well. Today, we find this institutionalization in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which has turned moral individualism increasingly into a globalized culture that is both stimulated and safeguarded by the UN (Elliott, 2014). Within the European Union, human dignity is explicitly mentioned in the EU treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, in which the dignity of the human person is not only a distinct fundamental right in itself but constitutes the real basis of all fundamental rights.

Moral individualism also underlies the notion of citizenship and, particularly, the widening of its meaning during the past centuries. Through this concept, law grants rights to individuals and simultaneously links them with a nation-state. Besides civil and political rights, twentieth century citizenship comprises through the notion of social rights the right for each human being, irrespective of their difference or origin, to a minimum

of economic welfare, education, health and security as well as the right to share to the full in the social heritage. The ‘equalization between the more and the less fortunate at all levels, between the healthy and the sick, the employed and the unemployed’, thus T.H. Marshall (1950: 102) emphasizes, ‘is not so much between classes as between individuals within a population, which is not treated for this purpose as though it were one class.’ This characterization clearly indicates that the notion of the equal and worthy individual, who is unqualified by particularities and must be first and foremost regarded as intrinsically embodying the dignity of being human, is central to the notion of social rights.

The post-war welfare state effectively institutionalized social rights through a complex regime of public services (Dean, 2015).<sup>vii</sup> Marshall (1981) terms the welfare state a ‘hyphenated’ society: a ‘democratic-welfare-capitalism’ in which a precarious balance has to be negotiated again and again between the welfare of citizens, private economic profit and state impact. The welfare state’s translation of moral individualism indeed does not imply the disappearance of inequality or of the logic of the market altogether but rather involves the idea of a more meritocratic basis for differences in wealth.<sup>viii</sup>

### *Theoretical ‘Crystallizations’*

Within sociology, Emile Durkheim was the first to emphasize the distinctive character of moral individualism against the prevailing utilitarian discourse; moreover, in his later work he came to grant it a central role in his approach of cultural cohesion and social solidarity within a modern society, thus overcoming his initial scepticism about its possible integrative function (Marske, 1987; Laermans, 2014).<sup>ix</sup> In line with the more general transition around 1900 in his work from a structural to an idealist approach, and partly inspired by Auguste Comte’s dreams of a new ‘religion of humanity’, Durkheim regards the shared appreciation of the individual as bearer of a general human worth as a crucial social ideal. Within a society characterized by a growing task differentiation that stimulates individual differentiation, it actually is the only definition of the valuable that can create a genuine solidarity within society. The new ideal sacralises the individual-as-person or as possessor of a ‘soul’ and is instituted by society, thus Durkheim emphasizes. Hence his expression ‘cult of the individual’: moral individualism unites modern society in a comparable manner as traditional religion used to.

Inspired by Durkheim’s idea of ‘the cult of the individual’, Erving Goffman (2005) has analysed how we pay respect to others in daily life through various interaction rituals. Well-known examples are keeping a minimum physical distance, even in a crowded lift or metro compartment; ‘civil dis-attention’, or the rule of not staring to

another person during communication or in public places; and opening sequences such as ‘how do you do?’ upon meeting someone. More in line with Durkheim’s culturalism, or the axiom that only common ideas and not just formal rituals can adequately secure social integration, Talcott Parsons explicitly concurred to Durkheim’s diagnosis that moral individualism plays a pivotal unifying role within modern society. He therefore describes it as one of the three main forms of institutionalized individualism, besides utilitarian and expressive individualism (Parsons, 2007; compare Bourricaud, 1977).

Inspired by Parsons’ social systems approach, yet without endorsing its culturalist leanings, Niklas Luhmann (1999) has developed a primarily structuralist approach of human rights as the prime epitome of ‘the cult of the individual’. According to Luhmann, the emphasis on the equal and worthy subject is a logical consequence of functional differentiation, or the ‘splitting up’ of modern society into diverse subsystems such as politics, economy, law or education that each fulfil an essential societal function (Verschraegen, 2002). Given this context, every individual must have the possibility to freely move from one domain to another or to participate in different subsystems through the successive taking up of distinctive social roles such as citizen, consumer, legal client or student. Precisely this proverbial social nomadism is guaranteed by the fundamental freedoms. With the concomitant pluralization corresponds a fragile and instable individual identity that human rights endow with an extra protective and stabilizing

‘shield’ through the notion of the person as a separate category. At the same time, human rights avoid a regression back to a hierarchical, pre-modern society in which the prime subsystems were collective entities such as tribes or estates that imposed a social identity negating individuality.

## **Expressive Individualism**

### ***Definition***

Like utilitarian individualism, expressive individualism is self-directed, yet does not have an instrumental but a distinctive value-rational character. Actions do not have to further personal interests or desires but are primarily perceived as means to express one’s ‘true self’, particularly from an emotional point of view. Consequently, authenticity is a central value in this variant: ‘to be true to yourself’ is at once the principal yardstick and goal of expressive action (Taylor, 1991).<sup>x</sup> Through the marked stress on the uniqueness of each individual, expressive individualism clearly diverges from its moral counterpart, which emphasizes human sameness and equality,. Moreover, moral individualism is intimately connected with the faculty of the will as the prime condition of possibility for moral choices and an ethical lifestyle; on the contrary, expressive individualism highlights the shared capacity to have individual feelings or to be personally affected. Both modes of

individualism also differ in the way they criticise and eventually reject traditional socio-cultural arrangements. Whereas moral individualism repudiates social hierarchy and inequality under reference to the idea that all human beings possess an intrinsic and equal worth as members of humanity, expressive individualism criticizes first and foremost those cultural conventions and routinized forms of sameness that hamper the possibilities for true self-expression.

Historically, Jean-Jacques Rousseau played a key role in the discursive articulation of expressive individualism (Taylor, 1989). In Rousseau's view, our moral purpose and only road to ultimate happiness is to restore the lost contact with the original sense of ourselves, which he considers in line with the intrinsic goodness of nature and would offer us an intuitive feeling of what is right and wrong. However, Rousseau's ideas exemplify a broader shift during the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that is mostly associated with the somewhat loose notion of Romanticism (compare Taylor, 1989, 1991). According to romantic poets like Blake, Wordsworth, Novalis, or Hölderlin and philosophers such as Herder or Schelling, living in accordance with the surrounding nature is a crucial way to discover one's own human nature, now understood in terms of personal feelings and passions. Sigmund Freud further 'complexified' this emotionalist view of the self through the distinction between manifest and latent emotions, conscious and unconscious drives. Hence the notion of a 'double self' and the concomitant idea that

the expression of one's 'true self' is synonymous with the exploration of unconscious feelings or desires.

The counter culture that already emerged during the 1950s and became highly trendsetting among youngsters during the period 1965-1975 translated the values of personal authenticity and emotional self-expression into a widespread longing for liberation of the sartorial, sexual and other norms of 'square society'. In essence, the counter culture wanted to break the prevailing socio-cultural order in order to be oneself, which is why Parsons (2007) speaks of 'the expressive revolution' (compare Turner, 2005). The then counter culture actually rehearsed the romantic tendency to choose the transcendent over the finite, the taboo-breaking over convention, and innovation over repetition (Martin, 1981). However, the counter culture's stress on anti-structure has meanwhile become part and parcel of the dominant cultural structure. Within the Western world, thus Roland Inglehart (1997) argues, a culture shift has become institutionalized during which post-materialist values such as authenticity and self-expression have gained prominence over materialist ones. Bellah et al. (2008) as well extensively studied the institutionalisation of expressive individualism and its utilitarian counterpart in contemporary American culture and situate expressive ideals primarily in the private sphere or 'lifestyle enclave' as opposed to the strongly utilitarian public sphere.<sup>xi</sup>

### ***Primary Societal Institutionalizations***

Already long before the idea of authenticity became the core of a widely shared normative pattern, expressive individualism was institutionalized within specific domains. We already referred to Romantic Art, which broke with the primacy of mimesis and the stress within religious art and Academicism on art's moralizing function (Vaughan, 1994). Originality through emotional self-expression, individual creativity and imagination became the norm for good art: the true artist is a genius who does not follow aesthetic rules or precepts but only relies on his personal vision and intuition. The manifestation of art therefore collides with its expressive potential, which can never be exhausted by specific forms or arrangements. Although the heyday of Romantic Art in the strict sense was already over around the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the idea that art is synonymous for self-development continues to be highly influential within both professional art worlds such as contemporary dance (Laermans, 2015) and the more 'arty' strands in popular music associated with the 'alternative mainstream' (Keunen, 2015).

Romanticism also directly influenced social life through the new ideal of romantic love as the necessary base for genuine intimate relationships (Illouz, 1997). Authenticity must prevail between partners: their personal relationship should be the pre-eminent domain in which they can fully develop their personal potentials and be emotionally open toward each other. Together they can be who they 'really' are and take off the social



masks they are wearing in public life. According to the ideal of romantic love, a personal relationship is indeed not structured by selective role expectations but first and foremost relies on the norm that the involved partners behave authentic and give each other ample room for communicative self-expression (Luhmann, 2012). The partners are interested in each other's 'self' and subjective experiences of the world on the one hand and in the relation as such on the other. Giddens (1991) therefore describes contemporary personal relationships as 'pure relationships' and points out that particularly love relations are no longer determined by pre-existing external involvements.

Closely related to intimate relations is the therapeutic domain, which offers within a professional context marked by confidentiality chances for both the authentic expression of one's feelings and a narrative or unitary structuring of the self. Foucault was one of the first to study the shaping and disciplining of the self through therapeutic interventions inspired by the earlier religious self-technique of confession (compare Rose 1999, Danziger 1997). Contemporary sociologists document how therapeutic language overflowed the boundaries of professional psychology and transformed into a general 'therapy culture' (Furedi 2003, Illouz 2008). This is exemplified in the 'self-help movement', which changes individuals in their self-therapists (McGee 2005, Dolby 2005). More generally, there seems to exist a general obsession with wellness: we have to care for our mind and even more so for our body through food, sleep, sports or

meditation in order to be the best possible version of ourselves (Cederström & Spicer, 2015).

There is yet a third domain that may be associated with Romanticism as the historical engine propelling expressive individualism. Indeed, as Colin Campbell (1987) has argued, the breakthrough of modern consumption was intrinsically linked with both the pursuit of material goods allowing self-expression and the longing for ever new emotional experiences or sensations. Whereas fashion still satisfies the latter urge, ‘to be oneself’ through the buying of particular commodities has meanwhile become a central slogan in advertisement. Half a century ago, consumption was associated with ‘keeping up with the Joneses’, conformity and passivity; on the contrary, in today’s dealing with consumer goods the notions of activity, personal development and individual activity are code words, resulting in a.o. the birth of the ‘prosumer’ (Beverland and Garrelly, 2010). Also in contemporary marketing the ideas of realness, craftsmanship, authenticity and naturalness are key (O’Neill, Houtman and Aupers, 2014). The recent trend of DIY (‘Do It Yourself’) fashion, knitting and sewing as well signals a nostalgic return to these values.

The institutionalization of expressive individualism from the 1970s onward resulted in its assimilation within the sphere of work and production beyond the traditional ‘expressive professions’ in the domains of education, social work or therapeutic care (Bernice, 1981). Already with the advent of mass consumption, various

new professions emerged that blurred the distinction between high and popular art through a marked emphasis on creativity and innovation. These new ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Bourdieu, 1984), which make up the core of the new middle class, work within the domains of advertising, design or public relations. Due to the growing ‘aesthetization’ of goods and services, which is often regarded as a crucial symptom of ‘postmodernization’, these spheres have become of central importance for the realization of economic value (Lash and Urry, 1994). As is also underlined by Negri & Hardt (2000), those performing the related ‘immaterial labour’ mostly value their work as offering genuine chances for the realization of personal capacities, even for self-expression. The artist has thus become a more general model, particularly within the cultural industries or the creative economy (indeed a telling expression) (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Consequently, expressive individualism changed from a rather specific ethos into a common professional one with which correspond new post-Fordist management styles emphasizing individual freedom and personal engagement to such an extent that Peter Flemming (2014) speaks of ‘the corporatization of life’.

### ***Theoretical ‘Crystallizations’***

The sociological theory *about* expressive individualism abounds, describing its historical development (e.g. Berman 2009), its subsequent institutionalization in various societal

spheres as well as a general actor-subscript, and the way it promotes a new 'life politics' differing from former emancipatory politics (Giddens, 1991). However, as far as we know, no social theory regards the desire for authentic self-expression as a distinctive causal factor that helps to explain social behaviour in general. In this respect, sociology markedly differs from certain strands within psychology or psychoanalysis. As Parsons (2007) already pointed out, the longing for emotional authenticity or unmediated self-expression is indeed rather counter-intuitive to the sociological imagination. However, indirectly authenticity has informed the normative valuation of certain societal evolutions, especially regarding identity and the so-called culture industry, particularly within the thinking of the Frankfurter Schule. Marcuse (2002, 2015) for example takes authenticity as his vantage point when he criticizes the false needs induced by industrial society in the worker. Production as well as consumption alienate people from their 'true nature', resulting in a repressed Eros or libidinal potential. Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) as well take the possibility of authentic culture as their implicit premise when criticizing the 'culture industry and its standardized production of 'soulless' songs and films

We can trace the sociological valuation of authentic social life and culture even further back to Georg Simmel's (1997) diagnosis of 'the tragedy of culture' characterizing modernity. Inspired by Hegel, Simmel opposes objective to subjective culture. While the

first stems from the second and its attainment to personal development, the objectification in cultural forms, such as laws, traditions, language or norms, alienates from the truly subjective and can even form an impediment to authentic expression. Modernity intensifies this structural tension through the oversupply of evermore specialized, fragmented and fleeting forms or object that overwhelm the individual and curtail the chances for a genuine authentic expression.

### **Conclusion and discussion**

The above considerations do not exactly open new vista's but synthesize in a systematic fashion and from a consistently sociological point of view the still expanding and varied literature on modern individualism. As was already suggested by Meyer and Jepperson (2000), the characterization of the individual as an actor or a subject, having agency thanks to self-consciousness and a free will, is a basic script that was institutionalized in modernity and globalized during recent decades. However, this script inspires three distinct modes of institutionalized individualism that have different histories, dominate in divergent societal spheres and inspire contrasting modes of theorizing in the social sciences. The distinction between utilitarian, moral and expressive individualism is as such rather evident and may be traced back, as Parsons (2007) suggests, to Immanuel Kant's three critiques. Nevertheless, to regard them systematically as institutionalized

interpretations varying a basic script informing modern culture still demands an effort in sociological imagination that seems to go a bit ‘against the grain’.

We started this article with a brief critical discussion of individualization theory and the contention that individuals are incited to act more autonomously within the framework of institutions during the last decades. Two connections can in fact be drawn between this claim and the discussed scripts of individualism. On the one hand, the period during which the process of individualization took off (the 1960s) and then took root (the 1970s) accords with the becoming current of expressive individualism. This is reflected in the writings of Bauman, Beck and Giddens, which give a prominent role to the expressive variant of individualism and therefore emphasise intimate relations and changing gender-roles. On the other hand, individualization can as well be viewed in terms of a primarily cultural transformation that ‘democratized’ or at least heightened the overall plausibility of both the individual-as-actor script in general and its three subscripts in particular within the life-world. This latter perspective suggests a broader research agenda. Qualitative research into how contemporary individuals deal with the three modes of individualism that are institutionalized with different accents in various societal domains might offer us more insight into the daily functioning of these subscripts and how people rely on them to shape their identity. Hence the question how and when they perhaps combine these three distinctive frameworks within a synthesizing self-narrative

or, on the contrary, how and when they might personally identify with just one mode of institutionalized individualism. Subsequently, questions as well arise as to how people are socialized in these identity subscripsts, how their notion of identity or sense of subjectivity might change over time or whether their identification with one subscripsts is related to the specific societal domain they relate to.

Notwithstanding their different historical genesis and societal institutionalization, the three just discussed subscripsts show some overlap and interconnections. Firstly, the self-directedness in utilitarian and expressive individualism is normatively regulated. For example, in the expression of personal opinion, the norm to not insult or harm someone else regulates free speech. Or, more radically, being a serial-killer is not deemed to be a genuine expression of one's personality. More generally, our freedom ends where it touches upon someone else's freedom. As for the rational pursuit of self-interest, all possible or efficient means are not deemed culturally legitimate, a point that R.K. Merton (168, 1968a) indeed already stressed in his well-known re-interpretation of Durkheim's notion of anomie. Secondly, the other-directness in moral individualism can be linked with ego-centred motives 'to do the right thing'. For example, one can act ethically to get recognition of others or to obtain social status. Acting empathically may therefore not only serve the intrinsic goals of another person, but can as well be inspired by extrinsic

goals. The three discerned modes of institutionalized individualism are indeed ideal types: in fact, these subscripts are less equivocal as the term ‘script’ might suggest.

Last but not least, a rather fundamental reservation may be voiced with regard to the idea of individualism. Given the just unfolded culturalist point of view, this notion is not that evident since ‘the other’ or ‘the social’ is always implied in the discussed scripts. Partly for ideological or polemical reasons, the term ‘individualism’ has been rhetorically stretched within philosophy and the social sciences. Thus, Durkheim (1963) coined the notion of moral individualism during the Dreyfus affair in a clearly engaged, ethically loaded essay to underscore his position opposite the reproach that the Dreyfusards were egoists not caring for their France. He thus reclaimed the idea of individualism, yet at the price of a profound semantic re-articulation in light of its dominant common sense that links up with the notion of utilitarian individualism. Overall, ‘individualism’ is indeed a value-loaded and ideologically connoted expression. Perhaps social scientists should therefore use more neutral terms such as identity- or subject scripts?

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<sup>i</sup> With the word 'crystallization' and related expressions, we do not imply a causal logic between the societal institutionalization of a mode of individualism and its theoretical formulation. As for instance neo-classical economics shows, the latter may as well have performative effects on the related script (i.e. utilitarian individualism) and institutional sphere (i.e. economics).



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<sup>ii</sup> We don't further elaborate this point since it would require an extensive in-depth reading of the writings of Beck, Bauman and Giddens.

<sup>iii</sup> We leave it open to what extent our culturalist perspective can be combined with the kind of constructivist approach of individualism in social systems theory (compare Laermans & Verschraegen, 2001) or, with quite different accents, in the work of Michel Foucault (2002) on the changing relations between power, knowledge and 'subjectification'.

<sup>iv</sup> Meyer and Jepperson indeed apply their actor-as-script approach to both individual actors and collective actors such as organizations, states or transnational political bodies.

<sup>v</sup> In line with a.o. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx, Macpherson (1969) views utilitarian or – in his terminology – possessive individualism as the prime ideology at once legitimizing and naturalizing the reign of free market capitalism.

<sup>vi</sup> Within sociology, the script of utilitarian individualism also shimmers through in social exchange theory as developed by Georges Homans (1961) and Peter Blau (1964). However, during the 1980s this somewhat particular blend of psychology and micro-economics, resulting in the double-sided axiom that individuals pursue both their personal preferences and social rewards in social relations, faded away. Social exchange theory indeed did not intellectually survive the growing impact of codified RCT within the different social sciences.

<sup>vii</sup> Durkheim (1963) already suggested that moral individualism is an ethos that moves beyond the protective core mandate of the state and asks for a serious widening of the state's tasks.

<sup>viii</sup> The actual balance between democracy, welfare and capitalism may differ among singular welfare states. Overall, three different regimes can be discerned (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Whereas the liberal model is based on minimum income schemes and provides social protection only to those who are in need when family and market fail, the conservative model has social insurance schemes mainly focussing on maintaining the status quo. The social democratic model probably most strongly institutionalizes moral individualism through the minimum income for all, regardless of their status on the economic market.

<sup>ix</sup> In his initial works such as *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim (2014) was still pessimistic about the integrative power of the ideal of individualism and held the opinion that it may eventually be too weak to secure social cohesion. Later, especially in his essay 'Individualism and the Intellectuals', he changes his mind and describes it as the preeminent modern ideal (Durkheim, 1973).

<sup>x</sup> As Trilling (1972) has rightly emphasized, authenticity differs from sincerity. Whereas the first value promotes a strict individual stance, the latter presupposes an impersonal ethical code stressing the desirability of honesty, truthfulness, fairness and impartiality.

<sup>xi</sup> From a broader historical perspective, Daniel Bell (1979) has described how the expressive ethos took root in modernist culture and avant-garde movements and subsequently in hedonistic consumerism, clashing with the utilitarian and disciplinary norms that dominate in the sphere of work or production.